DHAKA THURSDAY JANUARY 22, 2004

IS to be further marginalised?

A recipe for weaker democracy

HE government is planning to extend the intervening period between two parliament sessions from 60 to 90 days. If the move is taken, it will push the already dormant parliament into a state of further hibernation with fewer sessions in a year.

At a time when there should be redoubled efforts to bring parliament to life, steps seem to be contemplated to further weaken it. We understand that the government has no control over the opposition boycott -- seen as exerting the most benumbing influence on the parliamentary proceedings. But the government has also failed to manage its own house -- a point made clear by the lack of quorum in parliament sessions. Similarly, the parliamentary standing committees are not work-

We believe the plan to increase the time between two sessions to 90 days is a blatant attempt to undermine functioning of parliament. We have to bear in mind that in the presence of a powerful executive branch of the government, the parliament plays a pivotal role in ensuring transparency and accountability.

Its seems the whole plan is based on the erroneous concept that fewer working days at the parliament will give the lawmakers more time to concentrate on development activities in their constituencies. Here we would like to point out that MPs are elected to parliament to work there as people's representatives. They should have no direct role in development works that are supposed to be undertaken and supervised by the elected local government representatives. If the lawmakers are brought into the picture, there will be overlapping of duties.

The ruling party is wrongly focusing on the development functions of the MPs. By lessening the frequency of parliament sessions, the government will only institutionalise two very negative things. First, the emphasis on the MPs having a direct role in development might foster an antagonistic relationship between them and the local government representatives. Second, the primacy of parliament in a democracy will be given a short

Parliament as the centre-piece of popular sovereignty must have a fuller play with its sessions held every two months in the very least.

Bomb blast cases

When will these be solved?

URING the last 27 months of the four-party alliance rule, there have been at least five bomb blasts in different parts of the country. Though the investigations began with some aplomb, these tended to peter out down the road, finally disappearing into wilderness. Apart from collecting bits and pieces of evidence from the spots, doing some preliminary investigation and in the case of only one blasts, arresting one suspect, nothing really happened in the end. The blasts and the perpetrators behind them

Police officials have cited certain reasons for lack of progress in the investigation, such as, frequent transfer of investigation officers, delay in giving reports about forensic evidence, lack of required equipment to examine bomb blasts etc. But the most shocking reasons they mentioned would shed ample light on the principle cause of the delay. It's the political influence. Whenever the investigation officers tried to get to the bottom of these incidents, political influence peddling, both in the past and the present, put spanner on the wheel. It prevented them doing their job in a professional manner. That probably explains why none of the bomb blast cases have so far been solved. Not just the failure to submit charge sheets, in almost all the cases, the real culprits have not been tracked down. The authorities have a lot of explaining to do, if they want to put our minds in rest. It is undoubtedly worrying to learn about the sad state of these cases. The authorities must ensure transparency in these cases, and make sure that politics does not comes in the way of investigation.

We have been watching with anxiety the recent discoveries of huge caches of arms and other explosives from around the country. As the police officials say, the materials used in the bombs are highly sophisticated. Discovering such huge caches will be meaningless unless the routes of trafficking these illegal materials are identified and sealed. At the same time, a culture of impunity has been creeping in since the real culprits are not being punished. We must not allow that to happen anylonger.

Democratisation through decentralisation

DR MOAZZEM HOSSAIN

N decentralisation, Bangladesh has an "on again, off again" history. The country first witnessed the taste of decentralisation in 1975 in the form of administrative reform surrounding the Zila (district) administration (governorship). This was short lived due to the political turmoil after the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in August

The next wave of decentralisation hit during President Zia ur Rahman's regime between 1976 and 1981. He was keen to introduce a grassroots administration at the village level called *Gram Sarkar* (village government). This attempt was also ceased to operate after Zia was killed in a military coup in

The third attempt of decentralising Bangladesh's administration was made by President H M Ershad by introducing an elected administration at the Upazila (subdistrict) level in 1985. The subsequent elected government of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia dissolved this system in 1991.

It appears that, at least three genuine attempts on decentralisa-tion were reversed in the last quarter of a century. introduction and reversal of decentralisation policies inflicted huge drain to the public funds without brining any change at the local level administration since the independence. This has been a major mark of failure and wastage of scarce resources during various military and elected regimes over the last thirty years. Decentralisation Bill under 7th

Parliament (1996-2001): The Local Government Reform Commission submitted a report to the government in May 1997. The government subsequently passed a legislation to hold elections for the *Upazila Parishad* (sub-district level) and also a bill was passed by the Parliament on establishing Zila Parishad (district level). government of Sheikh Hasina pledged to implement elected local government bodies at all four

levels: Gram (village), Union (currently in place), Upazila and Zila. While one can understand her government's eagerness to decentralise, but to introduce reforms at four levels in one term was by far an ambitious task, particularly, without having adequate resources and without forming any political consensus on the agenda. At the end, in the life of the 7th Parliament, nothing was implemented due to lack of cooperation from then opposition.

The manifestos of two major parties (AL and BNP) for the 2001 general election have given decentralisation issue a priority agenda. The AL pledged again that the administrative decentralisation in the future was going to be course, would be a premature attempt now to make any evaluation of the programme. However, one cannot hold a genuine hope on the success of this plan after knowing what is coming out in the media over the last few months. Moreover, the government has unilaterally implemented the programme with having no political consensus. As a result, this also seems destined to a failure with risking, once again, huge amount of public funds being going into drain. What is desired of a democratic government?

Devolution

To develop a decentralisation strategy for Bangladesh one must first look at the country's ability to

the local bodies directly. Moreover, the objective is to relinquish some power by the centre and transfer them to local bodies. For example, MPs allowed only the legislative roles and giving development roles to devolved authorities. This measure will also drive the unscrupulous politicians out of politics. This objective can be fulfilled effectively if a local government for a Žila is established in the first phase. In the second phase, further strengthening of the upazila parishad and presently run union parishad will bring the fruits of the decentralised governance to the doorsteps of the vast rural population. Once a consensus on devolution has been reached, rest of the agenda

ally, there is no place for such a term in the liberal democracy literature. The nation dubbed as Moderate Muslim because. despite being a Muslim majority nation, Bangladesh has been under female leadership for sometime (both Prime Minister and Opposition Leader), which is not only a rare example in the mature democracies but is almost non-existent in Islamic countries. Whatever the cause, since this period, the democratisation process in Bangladesh has taken a non-liberal course with religion beginning to play a major role in nurturing democracy. A major non-religious political party (BNP) made a formal coalition with the religious fundamentalist

their cronies have been blamed for creating turbulence in the economic front by plundering national wealth over the last quarter of a century. It may be true that a handful of criminals and their aids have been taking part in creating the present polluted socio-economic-political environment, but at the end it rests with the politicians, particularly, with the supreme leaders of both government and opposition parties to provide a solution.

To bring back a genuine liberal democratisation process, the society is least interested to live any more with politicking the destiny of the masses. Many, however, believe that it would take a miracle to change the present political mindset to fix the suffocation that currently exists in the country. Confrontation still makes the call for the politicians' day and it is growing by the hour, by the day and by the week. Bangladesh's destiny is now certainly rests with the two eaders: the PM and the Opposition Leader, to say the least. However, the so-called 'third' force is likely to be a formidable challenge soon. With this prospect, the present environment would not last long in a so-called 'political hot bed' such as Bangladesh.

Finally, how to seek a way out of the present stalemate? It needs an immediate suspension of the MPs role in development works. This seems to be the centre of all the sources of deals, pilferage and corruption in the society. This is also the major source of obstacle in reaching a consensus for a genuine decentralisation process to begin (recent squabble on holding Ipazila election in the cabinet immediately comes to mind). If the MPs settle with legislative roles only, the politics can be reestablished as politics of nationbuilding and mass welfare. If the politicians fail to show any way out, certainly people power will do. That is what the lesson the history provides.

Dr Moazzem Hossain works at the Griffith

How to seek a way out of the present stalemate? It needs an immediate suspension of the MPs' role in development works. This is a major source of obstacle in reaching a consensus for a genuine decentralisation process to begin (recent squabble on holding Upazila election in the cabinet immediately comes to mind). If the MPs settle with

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the party's major development goal. In the future, while the party was committed to introduce four tiers of local administration (district, sub-district, union and village), it also committed to make all sub-district towns under municipality law. In addition, all union council centres would be modernised with proper infrastructure and communications facilities making them the core development centres of rural areas and transforming them into little townships. The BNP's manifesto pledged to establish local new administration at all three levels: district, sub-district and village. If one examines the manifestos of both the major parties closely, it is hard to detect any differences in philosophical and institutional terms for bringing a reform at local

Decentralisation Bill under 8th Parliament (2001-2006): In early 2003, the BNP coalition government passed a bill to introduce, once again, Zia's Gram Sarkar plan in every village in the country. So far, the majority villages have been brought under this plan. It is, of

fund a reform programme which is likely to attain a meaningful and sustainable outcome. In the past so much money has gone into drain in the name of decentralisation that the nation is not prepared to see this repeated again. A sustainable and practical strategy must be devised by keeping the following outcomes in mind (put forward by the World Develop-ment Report 1999): 1) devolution

and transfer of power from a centralised to a decentralised administration; 2) devising appropriate functions and resources for a decentralised administration; 3) developing electoral rules and accountability measures for decentralisation; and, 4) drawing an appropriate management plan for decentralised governance. It is expected that a meaningful

devolution and transfer of power from the centre can proceed smoothly if Zila and Upazila Parishads are established in phases. One must remember that the major objective of the decentralised governance is to

without any difficulty. Is devolution then a wishful thinking or a genuine way forward?

mentioned above can be realised

Democratisation

The present political environment cannot be regarded as democracy friendly. The main ruling party (BNP) is in turmoil and the former President (Prof. B Chowdhury) is finally testing the political water after a few months in the wilderness. Once again, Bangladesh's twelve and a half years of political journey with virtually nonunctional parliamentary democracy, is stepping into another uncertain future. Why?

The uncertainty began immediately after the last general election (1 October 2001) which was held on a new premise and was not seen before. Let us explain more clearly. Former US President Bill Clinton paid a state visit to Bangladesh in March 2000. During this visit the Clinton administration branded Bangladesh as a Moderate Muslim Democracy (MMD). Conceptuformed a government with an alliance of fundamentalist religious parties after the 2001 general election. This transformed Bangladesh's liberal democracy, inadvertently or otherwise, into an MMD.

groups to win the general election.

The strategy worked and the BNP

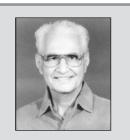
However, with too many noniberal features in place, indeed, thinking of decentralisation or wishful. Is there any way out?

Conclusion

Given the outcome of a parliamentary democracy over the sixth, seventh and current parliament, it is difficult, if not impossible to find an answer. The path for economic development looks long and hazardous for Bangladesh. take-off to full economic development has been delayed due to severe turbulence in terms of deteriorating law and order, uncontrolled corruption and political uncertainty, brought about by the unceasing political confrontation and turmoil. Moreover, some politicians and

economic cooperation in South

A policy toward India, please



M B NAQVI

T is high time, after 56 years, that Pakistanis defined their permanent purposes and interests vis-à-vis Índia. Pakistan's relations with India have so far been driven by an adversarial attitude and the vicissitudes of the Kashmir dispute. Following Kargi operations and 2002 grand confrontation, Islamabad has been desperate about the resumption of dialogue with New Delhi. This has been a second U turn in policy; hitherto, the Kashmir policy was premised on Jihad in the disputed areas forcing India into an acceptable settlement. This has been given up. Politically, it is a big price paid by a military-sponsored regime for resumption of dialogue.

Many questions arise. If only the great strategists in Islamabad could read the situation aright, they should have found it logical to turnaround the Kashmir policy as soon as they were forced into changing their policy of seeking strategic depth in Afghanistan. It nature of US' relations with India -and Pakistan -- by trying to understand the larger American strategic needs in Asia. Was there any understanding of the changes and commonalties in the American strategy between the Bush and governments before the famous "either with us or against us" telephone call? It is doubtful. Far too many Pakistanis simply thought that a Republican Administration was pro-Pakistan and a Democratic one was pro-India. There is however much

more to American foreign policy than such simplistic notions.

The US strategy now seeks to make India a strategic partner, the way Japan and Britain are. With Pakistan, the US relationship is cynical flirtation or worse; it is all too temporary, if only Islamabad can see clearly. Pakistan's India policy has been flawed: that there is no military solution to the Kashmir imbroglio is a conclusion that was arrived at after 1965 and 1971 wars, though for a time only. As soon as Pakistan acquired the atomic was Pakistan-sponsored; Taliban's campaign against Afghanistan will be greatly handicapped and

The second major concession is agreeing to SAFTA (South Asian Free Trade Agreement). If it is implemented fully and in its true spirit, it will set off a great expansion of trade in the region, especially if the SAARC goes ahead and makes SAPTA (the proposed South Asian Preferential Trade Agreement) also legally binding and fully operative. That will

paradigm. What new paradigm has been adopted cannot be answered categorically. It is possible, may be even likely, that this or future governments may not be able to nursue the new paradigm wholeheartedly, the outlines of which are not too difficult to see. But it would be proper if we try and important features of the new paradigm. Once the old paradigm about Kashmir and the consequent adversarial relations with India has been given up, as has actually

Pakistan are deeply concerned with the issue. A practical solution of the problem must be sought -but through peaceful and negotiated means. It involves evoking a lot of positive responses from the Indians. Pakistan can no longer bring to bear the threat of its armed forces. If so, India's responsiveness can only be a function of the strength of friendship that Pakistan can forge. despite many Indians dragging

Pakistanis have to think hard of

PLAIN WORDS

What it boils down to is to show India the benefits of friendship with Pakistan. One benefit would be common: economic advancement and more wealth creation, if SAFTA, SAPTA and other following steps of economic ment and more wealth creation, cooperation are taken and more wealth is created. There will be all round enrichment and India's share will not be less than those of other member states; in fact it will be more. But since all will benefit, that does not matter.

know-how, circa 1984 to 1986, it went on to convert a peaceful and secular protest movement of Kashmiris in the Valley into an Islamic Iihad. The year 2002 crisis showed that Pakistan's nuclear deterrent was not enough to ensure either the success of the Jihad or Pakistan's own security. Circumstances, including the US pressure, have effectively recreated the situation as it obtained between 1971 and 1984. Indeed it is now plain that Islamabad's failure to make true peace with India on the basis of Shimla Accord was a mistake.

It is right and proper that Musharraf regime has seen the need to go back to the Agreements made successively at Shimla, Lahore and the abortive one at Agra and to build on them. That is the only logical course. In terms of old mindsets, Musharraf has already paid a heavy price by conceding on three major issues: First, Pakistan will not allow its territory to be used against either India or Afghanistan; if fully implemented, it will put paid to Kashmir's Jihad insofar as it

deepen the economic relationships throughout the region and lay the foundations of closer cooperation among member states and lead to growing political harmonization of the region.

The third major concession is starting to favour the people-topeople contacts and, more unusual and difficult for old mindsets in Islamabad, cultural exchanges with India. It is possible to miss the significance of this decision. Widescale people-to-people contacts, i.e. freer travel for common people, and growing cultural cooperation provide the basis of stable peace from a long range viewpoint. Closer and more frequent contacts create friendships and common bonds. If Pakistan were to stay the course and determinedly pursue this objective, the Indians too will be forced to follow suit, though there is a fear that adoption of this old Indian plank by Islamabad may frighten the Indian Right to start disfavouring this idea. But it will not be easy for them.

People talk of a paradigm shift. True, it is a shift away from the old it with something that is logically coherent and can be expected to meet the emerging situation of India's rise as a big military power in the region.

Pakistanis have to adjust to the US-India strategic partnership. That is to say, Pakistan should not needlessly moan and cry over spilt milk. Nor should it become despondent or less concerned with its freedoms. Pakistanis are, and should remain, dignified human beings, uncowed by others. The purpose of this paradigm shift should not solely be on the basis of weakness, some of which has been obvious because of the mistaken policies of the past. The objective now has to be friendship, friendly cooperation and cultural relations on a wide-scale with India. No one need suppose that the Indians will also want all these things. Their Rightwing can become frightened at some stage. But Pakistan has now no option but to pursue its determination, despite smallminded Hindu communalists.

Kashmir is however not to be forgotten. Far too many people in

and make it ready to make some concessions on Kashmir. It will mean, in realpolitik terms, Pakistanis have to offer over time some kind of a deal that will make India relent and relax. A very good beginning has already been made by the three major initiatives that Islamabad has initiated. All that is necessary to be said is: stay the course and pursue the objective, despite even possible lack of responsiveness from other side for a time. After all the adversarial relations with India were a twoway street. There are strong vested interests in India also that prosper on bad relations with Pakistan. It should be in the minds of policymakers in Pakistan that this Indian resistance has to be overcome by totally non-military means and with the help of friendly Indians. Insofar as military means are concerned, other than a direct threat to the country's physical security, they should have no place in inter-state relations in South

how to make India more flexible

The purpose of free trade and

EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Asia can only be to sustain higher rates of economic growth in all SAARC member states. A single market and closer internal cooperation can make for rapid economic development of all. The pathway to progress lies through regional integration and the region's integration with Asia's and Europe's other regions through better communications to sustain arge-scale intercontinental trade Pakistan being at the tri-junction of West, South and Central Asian regions, can benefit greatly from overland trade -- in addition to the henefits it shall have of much improved transportation facilities.

What it boils down to is to show India the benefits of friendship with Pakistan. One benefit would if SAFTA, SAPTA and other following steps of economic wealth is created. There will be all round enrichment and India's share will not be less than those of other member states; in fact it will be more. But since all will benefit, that does not matter.

The second major benefit that can accrue to all is cultural enrichment through cultural exchanges and free movement of the people. These should be the major objectives for Pakistan's policy-máking in future. In this connection, the importance of free travel, preferably visa free throughout the region, at some stage in future, will be necessary. will intensify economic cooperation among the member states of SAARC as well as cement the bonds of friendship between Pakistan and India, without ignoring the Bangladesh and other people. Both cultural enrichment and economic progress would be needed for stable peace and for enhance-ment of regional security.

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TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Retirement age

Is it actually inevitable to enhance retirement age to 60 years where our country is burdened with joblessness? So far I understand the proposal has come up on the issue of extension of services of some government officials. I see the extension of services of some government officials is as more of a political decision than of state necessity. If the country could not than how could the country run after the expiry of extended services of those so-called indispensable

Our policy makers should look at the non-government organisations, multinational companies and most of the private banks which are being maintained successfully by the young officials

retirement age should rather be 55 Habibul Muhit

To ease the problem of joblessness.

Bangladesh is practising democracy since 1991.Our democracy is and vulnerable. We know the

Democracy at stake

parliamentary standing commit-tees are the cornerstone of parliamentary democracy, but in our country the parliamentary oodies do not meet regularly and they do not perform their duties. Opposition's walkout and the quorum crisis are common features of the *Jatiya Sangsad*. To boost democratic norms, opposition's participation is essential. The speaker can play a pivotal role to get things back to

The government should materialise the recommendations of parliamentary standing committees on a priority basis. So the political mindset should be harmonised and the electoral ystem modernised, if we want to establish democracy in the true sense of the term.

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Scientists abroad

The science and ICT minister's call to expatriate Bangladeshi scientists to come back to the country is as unrealistic as the order of that ministry for submitting monthly

progress report of research work by Scientists, particularly that of Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission (BAEC). The order of the ministry is not reasonable for it is not clear whether the persons who will peruse the reports have enough expertise to judge the merits and demerits of the report prepared by a physicist, chemist, biochemist, microbiologist, botanist or a zoologist . Since it is possible to prepare a report without doing any research, will they be able to detect the weaknesses of a report? The most disappointing sign is that no senior scientist tried to make the ministry understand that its plan is not

The call of the minister is not realistic because the existing scientists, particularly the youngsters are desperate to leave Bangladesh due to lack of a

research environment. The other problems include lengthy and faulty procurement process, lack of alternate power source, backlog in promotion, lack of access to nternet and telecommunication and appointment of non-scientist chairman of the BAEC that opened the door of the organisation's doom like the BCSIR. So before calling the expatriate scientists back home, the ministry should make some revolutionary change so that the existing scientists feel secure to stay in the country; new meritorious graduates find interes in joining government research institutes. Why the expatriate scientists will come back to Bangladesh? To be disconnected from 24-hour free internet access and phone, power supply? These are the minimum facilities that the scientists will be deprived of if they

come back. Other facilities deserve no mention. Take the necessary steps to retain the existing scientists in Bangladesh, then try to bring the expatriates back home. Ayoung scientist

Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission.

Politics and modern

The single greatest factor standing in the way of the rapid development of Bangladesh is the mindset of our politicians, A negative political culture has been allowed o develop which is alienating the masses from the political masters. Why? The followers wish to be

The genuine public opinion has

society, are politically polarised and do not have the moral courage to stand alone and neutral.

intellectuals, the thinkers of the

The herd-instinct is a common factor in the emerging smaller nations, leading to parochialism and tribalism. Self-preservation comes first, and the party is used as a channel or stepping stone for further consolidation of personal and individual security and to ensure interests. That was perhaps the reason why traditional politics in the UK was based on the camindars or landlords (the House of Lords). Today politics is used to earn a decent living.

In the developing countries, the middle class is the thinking backbone of a nation, because the rich are too rich and alienated from the poorer masses (great commu-

nication gap between the rural masses and the urban elite). This is the left-over from the *zamindari* days--the feudal system.

The NGO's came into the picture with their social field services, and n Bangladesh also, these agencies have contributed to the development of the rural society (the success of the micro credit programme is now universally recognised). However, the political parties who

rule the country through elected epresentatives, from the right path and goals, as the fast-changing world is based on materialistic prosperity.

Abdali